

This Toy Story Has Three Wheels

By MATT KRAMER

The Kiwis are coming! The Kiwis are coming! One if by land, two if by sea ... three if by ... both? Recently, sunbathers at Edgartown's Lighthouse Beach were shocked and awed when a boat drove onto the beach supported by three wheels.

The vessel was a high-performance amphibious marine craft created by the Sealegs Corporation of Auckland, New Zealand. In the water, a Sealegs appears no different than any other motorboat. Its distinctiveness becomes apparent when its three hydraulically powered wheels lower into the water so that the boat can drive ashore.

Sealegs opened its Boston headquarters, its first branch in North America, on June 9. Martha's Vineyard Shipyard now sells the craft on-Island. Two already have been sold to Vineyarders.

Before joining Sealegs, branch vice president Jon Hofflich was a commanding officer of a 110-foot patrol boat for the U.S. Coast Guard. Speaking of the Sealegs, he said, "It's a one hundred per cent boat with a serious added land capability, over mud, sand, rock, grass and pavement."

Duck boats, which have received bad press because of accidents on land and sea alike, are fast onshore and awkward in the water. In contrast, the Sealegs motors at a turtle-like six miles an hour on land and cuts through the water at 48 mph. On the recent trip, it carried Mr. Hofflich from Woods Hole to Edgartown



AMPHIBIOUS CRAFT CUTS THE WATER, CRAWLS ON LAND.

in approximately 20 minutes. On land, the boat's three wheels and low center of gravity lend it stability.

The amphibious boats were originally designed for search-and-rescue and military operations. The goal was to create a vessel that can move from land to water and back in rough terrain and remote waterways. The boat is now also marketed as a recreational vehicle.

The Sealegs Corporation has built 500 boats and distributed them in 25 countries. Half of the company's clientele are military and rescue units. The other half are private boaters.

Because the boat was designed for military use, Mr. Hofflich explained, it is "overbuilt for the recreational side,

allowing boaters confidence that they have a safe, capable, reliable boat."

The boats boast a five-millimeter thick aluminum hull with seven longitudinal stringers. The hull is built to be tough enough to be lowered on sand and even pavement.

In a demonstration on-Island, Mr. Hofflich showed off the toughness of the boat by lowering it onto the sandy asphalt by the Chappaquiddick ferry. He then used the hydraulic system to list the port side of the boat to about a foot off the ground. This tilt feature makes the boat accessible to those who have trouble climbing steps; they can sit on the side and swing their legs to get onboard.

Mr. Hofflich explained the boat's applicability to the Vineyard. "The Sealegs gives people who live on the water instant access to boating. We have clients who leave their driveway, roll down their yard, head on to the beach, and go boating. We have other clients who live several hundred yards from the water who drive to a ramp. You no longer need a mooring, a marina, a trailer, or hull paint!" The company's slogan is "All the fun. None of the hassle."

Of course the boats aren't cheap. The 6.1-meter version equipped with a 115-horsepower outboard motor runs \$90,000. But these boats may still present a tempting option for those too impatient to join the current 15- to 25-year waitlist for a mooring in Edgartown harbor. Plus, as 18-year-old Hallie Carol, a Chappy ferry deckhand testified, "It's really cool!"

